

CHAPTER XIX

MRS. PEAGRIM BURNS INCENSE

"They tell me ... I am told ... I am informed ... No, one moment, Miss Frisby."

Mrs. Peagrim wrinkled her fair forehead. It has been truly said that there is no agony like the agony of literary composition, and Mrs. Peagrim was having rather a bad time getting the requisite snap and ginger into her latest communication to the Press. She bit her lip, and would have passed her twitching fingers restlessly through her hair but for the thought of the damage which such an action must do to her coiffure. Miss Frisby, her secretary, an anæmic and negative young woman, waited patiently, pad on knee, and tapped her teeth with her pencil.

"Please do not make that tapping noise, Miss Frisby," said the sufferer querulously. "I cannot think. Otie, dear, can't you suggest a good phrase? You ought to be able to, being an author."

Mr. Pilkington, who was strewn over an arm-chair by the window, awoke from his meditations, which, to judge from the furrow just above the bridge of his tortoise-shell spectacles and the droop of his weak

chin, were not pleasant. It was the morning after the production of "The Rose of America," and he had passed a sleepless night, thinking of the harsh words he had said to Jill. Could she ever forgive him? Would she have the generosity to realize that a man ought not to be held accountable for what he says in the moment when he discovers that he has been cheated, deceived, robbed--in a word, hornswoggled? He had been brooding on this all night, and he wanted to go on brooding now. His aunt's question interrupted his train of thought.

"Eh?" he said vaguely, gaping.

"Oh, don't be so absent-minded!" snapped Mrs. Peagrim, not unjustifiably annoyed. "I am trying to compose a paragraph for the papers about our party to-night, and I can't get the right phrase.... Read what you've written, Miss Frisby."

Miss Frisby, having turned a pale eye on the pothooks and twiddleys in her note-book, translated them in a pale voice.

"Surely of all the leading hostesses in New York Society there can be few more versatile than Mrs. Waddesleigh Peagrim. I am amazed every time I go to her delightful home on West End Avenue to see the scope and variety of her circle of intimates. Here you will see an ambassador with a fever...."

"With a what?" demanded Mrs. Peagrim sharply.

"'Fever,' I thought you said," replied Miss Frisby stolidly. "I wrote 'fever.'"

"'Diva.' Do use your intelligence, my good girl. Go on."

"Here you will see an ambassador with a diva from the opera, exchanging the latest gossip from the chancelleries for intimate news of the world behind the scenes. There, the author of the latest novel talking literature to the newest debutante. Truly one may say that Mrs. Peagrim has revived the saloon."

Mrs. Peagrim bit her lip.

"'Salon.'"

"'Salon,'" said Miss Frisby unemotionally. "They tell me, I am told, I am informed...." She paused. "That's all I have."

"Scratch out those last words," said Mrs. Peagrim irritably. "You really are hopeless, Miss Frisby! Couldn't you see that I had stopped dictating and was searching for a phrase? Otie, what is a good phrase for 'I am told'?"

Mr. Pilkington forced his wandering attention to grapple with the problem.

"I hear," he suggested at length.

"Tchah!" ejaculated his aunt. Then her face brightened. "I have it. Take dictation, please, Miss Frisby. 'A little bird whispers to me that there were great doings last night on the stage of the Gotham Theatre after the curtain had fallen on "The Rose of America," which, as everybody knows, is the work of Mrs. Peagrim's clever young nephew, Otis Pilkington.'" Mrs. Peagrim shot a glance at her clever young nephew, to see how he appreciated the boost, but Otis' thoughts were far away once more. He was lying on his spine, brooding, brooding. Mrs. Peagrim resumed her dictation. "In honour of the extraordinary success of the piece, Mrs. Peagrim, who certainly does nothing by halves, entertained the entire company to a supper-dance after the performance. A number of prominent people were among the guests, and Mrs. Peagrim was a radiant and vivacious hostess. She has never looked more charming. The high jinks were kept up to an advanced hour, and every one agreed that they had never spent a more delightful evening.' There! Type as many copies as are necessary, Miss Frisby, and send them out this afternoon with photographs."

Miss Frisby having vanished in her pallid way, the radiant and vivacious hostess turned on her nephew again.

"I must say, Otie," she began complainingly, "that, for a man who has had a success like yours, you are not very cheerful. I should have

thought the notices of the piece would have made you the happiest man in New York."

There was once a melodrama where the child of the persecuted heroine used to dissolve the gallery in tears by saying "Happiness? What is happiness, moth-aw?" Mr. Pilkington did not use these actual words, but he reproduced the stricken infant's tone with great fidelity.

"Notices! What are notices to me?"

"Oh, don't be so affected!" cried Mrs. Peagrim. "Don't pretend that you don't know every word of them by heart!"

"I have not seen the notices, Aunt Olive," said Mr. Pilkington dully.

Mrs. Peagrim looked at him with positive alarm. She had never been overwhelmingly attached to her long nephew, but since his rise to fame something resembling affection had sprung up in her, and his attitude now disturbed her.

"You can't be well, Otie!" she said solicitously. "Are you ill?"

"I have a severe headache," replied the martyr. "I passed a wakeful night."

"Let me go and mix you a dose of the most wonderful mixture," said

Mrs. Peagrim maternally. "Poor boy! I don't wonder, after all the nervousness and excitement.... You sit quite still and rest. I will be back in a moment."

She bustled out of the room, and Mr. Pilkington sagged back into his chair. He had hardly got his meditations going once more, when the door opened and the maid announced "Major Selby."

"Good morning," said Uncle Chris breezily, sailing down the fairway with outstretched hand. "How are--oh!"

He stopped abruptly, perceiving that Mrs. Peagrim was not present and--a more disturbing discovery--that Otis Pilkington was. It would be exaggeration to say that Uncle Chris was embarrassed. That master-mind was never actually embarrassed. But his jauntiness certainly ebbed a little, and he had to pull his moustache twice before he could face the situation with his customary aplomb. He had not expected to find Otis Pilkington here, and Otis was the last man he wished to meet. He had just parted from Jill, who had been rather plain-spoken with regard to the recent financial operations; and, though possessed only of a rudimentary conscience, Uncle Chris was aware that his next interview with young Mr. Pilkington might have certain aspects bordering on awkwardness and he would have liked time to prepare a statement for the defence. However, here the man was, and the situation must be faced.

"Pilkington!" he cried. "My dear fellow! Just the man I wanted to see! I'm afraid there has been a little misunderstanding. Of course, it has all been cleared up now, but still I must insist on making a personal explanation really I must insist. The whole matter was a most absurd misunderstanding. It was like this...."

Here Uncle Chris paused in order to devote a couple of seconds to thought. He had said it was "like this," and he gave his moustache another pull as though he were trying to drag inspiration out of it. His blue eyes were as frank and honest as ever, and showed no trace of the perplexity in his mind, but he had to admit to himself that, if he managed to satisfy his hearer that all was for the best and that he had acted uprightly and without blame, he would be doing well.

Fortunately, the commercial side of Mr. Pilkington was entirely dormant this morning. The matter of the ten thousand dollars seemed trivial to him in comparison with the weightier problems which occupied his mind.

"Have you seen Miss Mariner?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes. I have just parted from her. She was upset, poor girl, of course, exceedingly upset."

Mr. Pilkington moaned hollowly.

"Is she very angry with me?"

For a moment the utter inexplicability of the remark silenced Uncle Chris. Why Jill should be angry with Mr. Pilkington for being robbed of ten thousand dollars he could not understand, for Jill had told him nothing of the scene that had taken place on the previous night. But evidently this point was to Mr. Pilkington the nub of the matter, and Uncle Chris, like the strategist he was, re-arranged his forces to meet the new development.

"Angry?" he said slowly. "Well, of course...."

He did not know what it was all about, but no doubt if he confined himself to broken sentences which meant nothing light would shortly be vouchsafed to him.

"In the heat of the moment," confessed Mr. Pilkington, "I'm afraid I said things to Miss Mariner which I now regret."

Uncle Chris began to feel on solid ground again.

"Dear, dear!" he murmured regretfully.

"I spoke hastily."

"Always think before you speak, my boy."

"I considered that I had been cheated...."

"My dear boy!" Uncle Chris' blue eyes opened wide. "Please! Haven't I said that I could explain all that? It was a pure misunderstanding...."

"Oh, I don't care about that part of it...."

"Quite right," said Uncle Chris cordially. "Let bygones be bygones. Start with a clean slate. You have your money back, and there's no need to say another word about it. Let us forget it," he concluded generously. "And, if I have any influence with Jill, you may count on me to use it to dissipate any little unfortunate rift which may have occurred between you."

"You think there's a chance that she might overlook what I said?"

"As I say, I will use any influence I may possess to heal the breach. I like you, my boy. And I am sure that Jill likes you. She will make allowances for any ill-judged remarks you may have uttered in a moment of heat."

Mr. Pilkington brightened, and Mrs. Peagrim, returning with a medicine-glass, was pleased to see him looking so much better.

"You are a positive wizard, Major Selby," she said archly. "What have

you been saying to the poor boy to cheer him up so? He has a bad headache this morning."

"Headache?" said Uncle Chris, starting like a war-horse that has heard the bugle. "I don't know if I have ever mentioned it, but I used to suffer from headaches at one time. Extraordinarily severe headaches. I tried everything, until one day a man I knew recommended a thing called--don't know if you have ever heard of it...."

Mrs. Peagrim, in her rôle of ministering angel, was engrossed with her errand of mercy. She was holding the medicine-glass to Mr. Pilkington's lips, and the seed fell on stony ground.

"Drink this, dear," urged Mrs. Peagrim.

"Nervino," said Uncle Chris.

"There!" said Mrs. Peagrim. "That will make you feel much better. How well you always look, Major Selby!"

"And yet at one time," said Uncle Chris perseveringly, "I was a martyr...."

"I can't remember if I told you last night about the party. We are giving a little supper-dance to the company of Otie's play after the performance this evening. Of course you will come?"

Uncle Chris philosophically accepted his failure to secure the ear of his audience. Other opportunities would occur.

"Delighted," he said. "Delighted."

"Quite a simple, Bohemian little affair," proceeded Mrs. Peagrim. "I thought it was only right to give the poor things a little treat after they have all worked so hard."

"Certainly, certainly. A capital idea."

"We shall be quite a small party. If I once started asking anybody outside our real friends, I should have to ask everybody."

The door opened.

"Mr. Rooke," announced the maid.

Freddie, like Mr. Pilkington, was a prey to gloom this morning. He had read one or two of the papers, and they had been disgustingly lavish in their praise of The McWhustle of McWhustle. It made Freddie despair of the New York Press. In addition to this, he had been woken up at seven o'clock, after going to sleep at three, by the ringing of the telephone and the announcement that a gentleman wished to see him: and he was weighed down with that heavy-eyed languor which comes to those

whose night's rest is broken.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Rooke!" said Mrs. Peagrim.

"How-de-do," replied Freddie, blinking in the strong light from the window. "Hope I'm not barging in and all that sort of thing? I came round about this party to-night, you know."

"Oh, yes?"

"Was wondering," said Freddie, "if you would mind if I brought a friend of mine along? Popped in on me from England this morning. At seven o'clock," said Freddie plaintively. "Ghastly hour, what? Didn't do a thing to the good old beauty sleep! Well, what I mean to say is, I'd be awfully obliged if you'd let me bring him along."

"Why, of course," said Mrs. Peagrim. "Any friend of yours, Mr. Rooke...."

"Thanks awfully. Special reason why I'd like him to come, and all that. He's a fellow named Underhill. Sir Derek Underhill. Been a pal of mine for years and years."

Uncle Chris started.

"Underhill! Is Derek Underhill in America?"

"Landed this morning. Routed me out of bed at seven o'clock."

"Oh, do you know him, too, Major Selby?" said Mrs. Peagrim. "Then I'm sure he must be charming!"

"Charming," began Uncle Chris in measured tones, "is an adjective which I cannot...."

"Well, thanks most awfully," interrupted Freddie. "It's fearfully good of you to let me bring him along. I must be staggering off now. Lot of things to do."

"Oh, must you go already?"

"Absolutely must. Lots of things to do."

Uncle Chris extended a hand to his hostess.

"I think I will be going along, too, Mrs. Peagrim. I'll walk a few yards with you, Freddie, my boy. There are one or two things I would like to talk over. Till to-night, Mrs. Peagrim."

"Till to-night, Major Selby." She turned to Mr. Pilkington as the door closed. "What charming manners Major Selby has. So polished. A sort of old-world courtesy. So smooth!"

"Smooth," said Mr. Pilkington dourly, "is right!"

II

Uncle Chris confronted Freddie sternly outside the front door.

"What does this mean? Good God, Freddie, have you no delicacy?"

"Eh?" said Freddie blankly.

"Why are you bringing Underhill to this party? Don't you realize that poor Jill will be there? How do you suppose she will feel when she sees that blackguard again? The cad who threw her over and nearly broke her heart!"

Freddie's jaw fell. He groped for his fallen eyeglass.

"Oh, my aunt! Do you think she will be pipped?"

"A sensitive girl like Jill?"

"But, listen. Derek wants to marry her."

"What?"

"Oh, absolutely. That's why he's come over."

Uncle Chris shook his head.

"I don't understand this. I saw the letter myself which he wrote to her, breaking off the engagement."

"Yes, but he's dashed sorry about all that now. Wishes he had never been such a mug, and all that sort of thing. As a matter of fact, that's why I shot over here in the first place. As an ambassador, don't you know. I told Jill all about it directly I saw her, but she seemed inclined to give it a miss rather, so I cabled old Derek to pop here in person. Seemed to me, don't you know, that Jill might be more likely to make it up and all that if she saw old Derek."

Uncle Chris nodded, his composure restored.

"Very true. Yes, certainly, my boy, you acted most sensibly. Badly as Underhill behaved, she undoubtedly loved him. It would be the best possible thing that could happen if they could be brought together. It is my dearest wish to see Jill comfortably settled. I was half hoping that she might marry young Pilkington."

"Good God! The Pilker!"

"He is quite a nice young fellow," argued Uncle Chris. "None too many brains, perhaps, but Jill would supply that deficiency. Still, of course, Underhill would be much better."

"She ought to marry someone," said Freddie earnestly. "I mean, all rot a girl like Jill having to knock about and rough it like this."

"You're perfectly right."

"Of course," said Freddie thoughtfully, "the catch in the whole dashed business is that she's such a bally independent sort of girl. I mean to say, it's quite possible she may hand Derek the mitten, you know."

"In that case, let us hope that she will look more favourably on young Pilkington."

"Yes," said Freddie. "Well, yes. But--well, I wouldn't call the Pilker a very ripe sporting proposition. About sixty to one against is the way I should figure it if I were making a book. It may be just because I'm feeling a bit pipped this morning--got turfed out of bed at seven o'clock and all that--but I have an idea that she may give both of them the old razz. May be wrong, of course."

"Let us hope that you are, my boy," said Uncle Chris gravely. "For in that case I should be forced into a course of action from which I confess that I shrink."

"I don't follow."

"Freddie, my boy, you are a very old friend of Jill's and I am her uncle. I feel that I can speak plainly to you. Jill is the dearest thing to me in the world. She trusted me, and I failed her. I was responsible for the loss of her money, and my one object in life is to see her by some means or other in a position equal to the one of which I deprived her. If she married a rich man, well and good. That, provided she marries him because she is fond of him, will be the very best thing that can happen. But if she does not, there is another way. It may be possible for me to marry a rich woman."

Freddie stopped, appalled.

"Good God! You don't mean ... you aren't thinking of marrying Mrs. Peagrim!"

"I wouldn't have mentioned names, but, as you have guessed.... Yes, if the worst comes to the worst, I shall make the supreme sacrifice. To-night will decide. Good-bye, my boy. I want to look in at my club for a few minutes. Tell Underhill that he has my best wishes."

"I'll bet he has!" gasped Freddie.